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OPINIONS

## Swine Flu: Businesses need a pandemic plan

BY LEONARD M. OKUN, M.D  
September 28, 2009

Hardly a day goes by without more news on the H1N1 virus and the potentially catastrophic impact that could occur in the months ahead.

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It's easy for people who are not healthcare providers to think they don't have to do anything to prepare.

But all businesses – large and small – should take the time now to put in place pro-active measures to help prevent the spread of H1N1, also referred to as swine flu. Businesses should also know what steps they would take if the virus affects your employees and your business.

The first wave of the virus spread last spring, giving us a glimpse of its potential and also a chance to evaluate preparedness.

The H1N1 virus spread from an initial 19 cases affecting two countries to more than 182,000 cases spread over 100 countries with 556 reported deaths as of Aug. 22. The World Health Organization rapidly moved its alert from Pandemic Phase 3 to a full-blown Pandemic Phase 6 status based on the relative easy transmission of this virus between humans.

Companies that believed they had very good plans to deal with an epidemic found that they were unable to activate components of them due to limited availability – or no availability – of essential supplies such as face masks, hand sanitizers, cleaning agents and anti-viral drugs.

Many other companies found that they had not properly developed plans and weren't prepared in the early stages of this pandemic – when the situation was evolving daily and the level of information was low and uncertainty was high.

So what can an employer do now to take learn from the lessons of the early stages of this pandemic?

Consider the following:

Appropriate Travel: Evaluate travel policies for associates both internationally and domestically. Companies need to have a process in place to determine when, where and how travel is appropriate.

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**Social Distancing:** Determine whether you can operate your business without close contact among your employees and customers. Is the company prepared to have employees work from home and when should such a program be initiated? When should group events such as those that occur in meeting rooms and cafeterias be avoided?

**Employee Interactions:** Evaluate policies for communicating with employees who have been exposed to someone who has become sick or has been potentially infected but not displaying symptoms. What about an employee who becomes sick while at work? Businesses that wait until these situations develop to create a plan will have difficulty effectively addressing them.

**Cleanliness:** Employers can change cleaning schedules to protect against transmission of the virus particles. This includes use of disinfectants to frequently clean common contact surfaces, including doorknobs, table surfaces, keyboards, telephones and other objects in the workplace. Education is a key to prevention.

**Vaccination:** Seasonal influenza is different from a pandemic influenza, and the vaccines given yearly for seasonal influenza are not effective against quickly emerging pandemic strains. However, vaccination against seasonal influenza is recommended to provide personal protection against human influenza.

While a vaccine is being developed to fight the H1N1 virus, the timing of its availability is unknown and businesses shouldn't count on it. In fact, initial supplies may be limited and directed primarily to the most at-risk populations.

Every company should strive to make their workplace a safe environment, so taking proactive steps and creating a swine flu prevention plan is a wise decision to avoid a potential outbreak among your employees.

Leonard M. Okun, M.D., is the national medical director for Valencia, Calif.-based U.S. HealthWorks, which has 151 clinics and worksites in 14 states, including two in the Dallas area.

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[American Society of Professional Estimators DFW Chapter 43 - 06:00 PM](#)

[Camp Fire USA Paint Out - All Day](#)

[CANSTRUCTION@2009 Competition & Exhibition benefiting Tarrant Area Food Bank - 10:00 AM](#)

[Human Resources JobNet - 08:45 AM](#)

[MasterWorks 2009 Fall Concert Series - Town of Westlake - 06:00 PM](#)



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